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‘What is Language but a Sound We Christen?’ Poetic Retellings as an Improper Surprise for Biblical Reception History

Abstract

Although overtly poetic interaction with biblical material has often been deemed beyond the pale in critical biblical scholarship, much work in reception history now positions such literature as part of the afterlife of a biblical text. However, although this is a welcome turn, this article argues that acts of poetic biblical retelling and recycling are more disruptive, troubling the ways in which critical scholarship operates. Utilising Timothy Beal’s thinking around the ‘cultural history of scripture’ and analysing Roland Boer’s sceptical attitude toward reception-historical practices, the first section teases out the nuances of how certain modes of biblical interpretation are deemed *primary* (and thus more legitimate) and others *secondary* (and thus anachronistic).

As such, the second section introduces poetic retellings of biblical material that foreground how poetry is a literary space where knowledge is articulated in particularly performative idioms. Reading poems from Kei Miller and Michael Symmons Roberts that appropriate biblical material, this analysis demonstrates that the poetic retelling of biblical material is an act of writing that refuses secondary status and cannot be simplistically yoked to traditional modes of exegesis. In this way, poetry problematizes the originary-secondary binary in reception-historical interpretation and, at the same time, recasts historical-critical exegesis as another form of ‘supplemental’ writing. This opens up the discipline to rethink some of its most protected interpretative paradigms and engage more fully with other forms of biblical ‘supplement’ across the disciplines.

Keywords: poetic retelling, supplement, biblical reception history, cultural history of scripture

Introduction

This article engages some of the aspects of reception-history that are currently under discussion within biblical studies and examines how, with qualification, these might offer

productive constitutional realignment for the discipline and its relationships with other disciplines. Utilising Timothy Beal's thinking around the 'cultural history of scripture' rather than reception-history and analysing Roland Boer's sceptical attitude toward reception-historical practices, the first section is concerned with teasing out the nuances of how certain modes of biblical interpretation are deemed *primary* (and thus more legitimate) and others *secondary* (and thus anachronistic). Jacques Derrida's early work on the 'dangerous supplement' that marks the operation of writing is useful to map out the specifics of these debates. I argue that if all writing and commentary participates in supplementarity, the question then becomes one of understanding how certain writings are deemed legitimate within certain paradigms. Beal's cultural-historical approach offers a broader perspective on these questions and enables the biblical scholar to move into new areas, both in terms of how 'the biblical' is viewed (how the Bible has always been a virtual idea that encompasses different textual material at different points) and in terms of the reading practices that can be brought to bear upon such material (cultural-theoretical, literary, political, sociological and so on). Biblical production and reception sustain one another in forms that offer themselves up for cultural analysis and commentary and thus engender a wider debate between Bible and religion scholars and scholars in other disciplines.

By way of an example of what I am arguing for here, in the second section I enact a turn toward poetic retellings of biblical material that foreground how poetry is a particular literary and cultural space where linguistic rules and references can be explored and exploited or, as Derek Attridge has suggested, *performed*.¹ Poetic appropriation of biblical material raises significant questions around reception, representation, and the productive

¹ D. Attridge, 'Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration', Paragraph 28, no. 2 (July 2005), pp. 18–34.

indeterminacies that mark a poem's particular use of language. Where a more scientific genre of writing might result in a reader wanting to limit or narrow a word's implications in order to produce clear and precise meanings, the reader of poetry often seeks to allow language as much semantic and phonetic free-play as possible within the poem. When both forms of reading are practiced on a single biblical text, the process of marking which signifying practice is primary and which secondary becomes extremely telling. Weaving literary theory and analysis with poems from the writers and critics Kei Miller and Michael Symmons Roberts, I argue that it becomes difficult to yoke poetic literature to a primary 'exegetical' act, an idea particularly suited to extending the work of reception-history into a 'cultural history of scripture' and for thinking about what is deemed proper in biblical interpretation.

I conclude with analysis of how poetic 'reception' and historical-critical 'reception', when not tied to notions of primary or secondary approaches to biblical texts, can *surprise* and provoke one another with different concepts of how to read (and rewrite) biblical material. In the final analysis, this levelling out of the hierarchy of disciplinary priorities offers biblical scholars, highly skilled in handling multiple texts, contexts, and interpretations, to ask larger questions and pursue other wide-ranging topics, perhaps, for example, reintegrating biblical scholarship in a wider comparative scriptures framework, as Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested², or examining how the Bible's position in contemporary culture contributes to a continually increasing body of 'parascriptural' material.³

² J. Z. Smith, "Religion and Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 1 (Spring 2009): pp. 5–27.

³ R. A. Kraft, "Para-mania: Beside, Before and Beyond Bible Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 5–27. As Kraft explains "our evolving perceptions of the 'parabiblical' (or as I now prefer, 'parascriptural') are really less a

Taking Soundings in ‘Reception History’

That there is an increasing and illustrative turn to reception-histories currently being effected in biblical studies there is no doubt,⁴ but I will not rehearse the origins of reception-history and how it has found its way into biblical studies here.⁵ Instead, I want to narrow my focus to the debates that underlie conceptions of how reception-history implies

subcategorization than an awareness of that large body of material (both text and tradition, as well as artwork and stones and buildings) that was respected and taken seriously by the people and cultures we study” (27). Although Kraft is concerned with historic ‘parascriptural material’, I believe his framing of this term has contemporary resonance and application.

⁴ See, by way of example, the recently published first issue of the journal *Biblical Reception* (edited by J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012); the journal *Relegere*, concerned with reception of religious texts outwith the Bible; the Special Issue on Reception in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33(2) 2010; C. Rowland, "Re-Imagining Biblical Exegesis," in M. Knight and L. Lee (eds.) *Religion, Literature and the Imagination: Sacred Worlds*, (London: Continuum, 2009) pp. 140-149; the Blackwell *Bible through the Centuries* series; and the massive ongoing 30 volume project of the *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009-).

⁵ For useful overviews for how the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans-Robert Jauss, and Wolfgang Iser have influenced the manifestations of reception-history in biblical studies see M. Knight, "Wirkungsgeschichte, Reception History, Reception Theory," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010), pp. 137-146; and T. Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," *Biblical Interpretation* 19, no. 4-5 (2011), pp. 357-372.

certain epistemological hierarchies, a process by which some forms of reading and interpreting texts are deemed more legitimate (in terms of critical payoff) than others. I will then go on to examine these conceptions in light of poetry that rewrites biblical texts and is certainly not content with being as passive or secondary as some models of ‘reception’ suggest. Indeed, it is important to note that, as one often finds when engaging in interdisciplinary forays, a ‘turn’ in one discipline may well be business-as-usual in another. For example, art historians and literary critics have traditionally had little difficulty with examining how biblical material has been reworked and manipulated by an artist or writer within a given cultural milieu. These debates are fundamental to how biblical scholars understand their own working paradigms and how these paradigms are constituted in relation to work being conducted in the broader field of the Arts and Humanities. The specific interpretative framework of much of the work done in biblical studies however, as I shall explore below, means that, as Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland suggest, “there has been little discussion of the wider cultural appropriation of the biblical texts in literature and other media.”⁶

This wider cultural appropriation is an acknowledgement that there are vast fields of exploration available for those who want to pursue studies in the impact of a biblical motif or character on different readerships during different historical epochs—what Timothy Beal calls “the common ‘Adam-and-Eve-through-the-centuries’ approach to biblical reception history.”⁷ However, although useful work can be done through this kind of approach, I want to engage with Roland Boer’s concerns about some of the implications of

⁶ J. Roberts and C. Rowland, ‘Introduction’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010), pp. 131–36 (132).

⁷ T. Beal, “Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” p. 136.

reception-history as implying that certain interpretative manoeuvres are irrecoverably positioned as secondary and supplemental. I shall read Boer's polemic against this primary-secondary binary through Jacques Derrida's idea of the 'dangerous supplement' before arguing that it is Beal's sense of the 'cultural history of scripture' that is best suited to broadening biblical studies' interdisciplinary relations. More specifically for this article, I shall demonstrate how a cultural history approach is better able to account for the poetic retelling as an act of rewriting that opens onto fundamental questions of how the idea of 'the biblical' circulates and is re-imagined across disciplinary borders, going beyond arguments about primary and secondary interpretative moves.

Choosing Which Supplements To Take

Much of the debate around reception-history is marked by biblical studies' particular and constitutional anxieties over the authority of origins. Reception-history seems to be imagined as a process which can occur once a biblical text has been canonically fixed, the text now in a state which ensures that it is able to be 'received' through the centuries. Broadly speaking, part of the intellectual orientation of historical-critical studies is the attempt to trace a text's genetic inheritance before "the tyranny of canonical assumptions"⁸ begins to solidify the ground of subsequent biblical interpretation. Of course, what such

⁸ R. A. Kraft, "Para-mania: Beside, Before and Beyond Bible Studies," p. 17. Kraft makes the point, often forgotten or elided in reception-histories, that we import modern ideas of what constitutes 'scripture' into our studies of ancient literatures. He introduces the term 'parascriptural' to make sense of material before (antecedent materials), and beside (alternate tellings) the eventually canonized material that has come down to us. He also identifies "the 'beyond', the continued development (or metamorphosis) of our identified 'scriptures' into other versions, by way of translation, or expansion and incorporation, or through excerpting and summarizing, and the like." (p. 18).

work proves is that the further scholars go back, the more apparent the diversity of scriptures, alternative versions, and translations becomes.⁹ As Beal suggests, this is a major problem for biblical reception-histories that need an ‘original’ text to proceed:

Where and when is the starting point, when finalization is completed and reception begins? After the early second century, when the latest Christian texts now in the canon were written? In the fourth century, when Athanasius’s Easter letter gives the earliest known list of scriptures that matches the canon as we now know it? (Surely Athanasius would not have asserted that list if there had not been other contenders.) After Jerome’s Vulgate?¹⁰

From this angle of approach, historical-critical methods create, and reception-historical interpretations have to contend with, the fact that there is no ‘reception-ready’ final form of the literary content of a biblical text. As Beal notes, if we extend this purview even further, the diverse material history of Bibles makes extremely clear that “there is no such thing as the Bible, and there never has been. There is no

⁹ Brennan Breed makes the important point that it was increasing religious authority (within both post-first century Judaism and Christianities) that began the process of thinking about “biblical texts and variant readings in a new way; the birth of the idea of an authoritative version of a biblical text simultaneously created the concept of variant readings. Thus the change occurred in the *theological* world, not the material world. Of course, the theological shift impacted the material world of biblical manuscripts, as scribal groups attempted to ‘correct’ texts toward a presumed authentic consonantal text.” “Nomadology of the Bible: A Processual Approach to Biblical Reception History,” in J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines (eds.), *Biblical Reception* 1 (2012): p. 305.

¹⁰ T. Beal, “Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” p. 368. Beal also acknowledges that this ideal of finalization is further constrained by assuming that ‘the Bible’ refers to a Christian canon of scriptures (p. 368).

Gadamerian or Jaussian other horizon of ‘the text’ to be received and understood within effective history. The Bible is not a thing, but an idea, or rather a constellation of often competing heterogeneous ideas, more or less related to a wide variety of material biblical things.”¹¹ As we shall see in Kei Miller’s work later in this article, it is the ‘cultural history’ of the Caribbean colonizers’ Authorized Version that takes on the mantle of being ‘the (ideal) Bible’ to which Miller’s poetic language responds.

What becomes apparent in reading different formulations of biblical reception-history is the common attempt to shift the intellectual priorities of biblical scholarship from excavating and analysing the ‘original’ contexts of a biblical motif or story (what Roberts and Rowland call the ‘proprietary academic’ claims of historical-criticism¹²), to charting “a recognition of the dynamic, living relationship between texts and readers, rather than an attempt to isolate and stabilize textual meanings from the mutability of human life.”¹³ John Lyons perhaps goes furthest in identifying the use-value of reception-history as being able to bridge the divide between historical-critics and postmodernists within biblical studies; if “source and form critics are, like all reception historians, trying to understand the responses of a

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² J. Roberts and C. Rowland, “Introduction,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): p. 133.

¹³ J. Roberts, “Introduction,” in M. Lieb *et al* (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 8.

contextually situated audience to their texts”¹⁴ then historical-criticism can be recast as a key dialogical element of reception-history without the absolute commitment to objective historical veracity that so troubles the ‘postmodernists’.

However, and with an impetus closely allied to Beal’s worries about the philosophical underpinnings of reception-history, Roland Boer identifies another fundamental problem. Although both historical-criticism and reception-history have long been aware of the difficulties in positing ‘original’ texts, Boer explores what we might call the *ideology* of the ‘original’ that continues to orientate biblical studies. He is sceptical of the ‘turn to reception-history’, arguing that it actually assists in the maintenance of traditional scholarly attitudes:

[T]he problem is that reception history assumes that the text is in some way *original*, the pad from which subsequent trajectories launch themselves forth. If ‘exegesis’ is the primary method appropriate to the originary biblical text, then reception history is secondary. It is a linear straightjacket [sic] that preserves the primacy of that strange guild of biblical ‘exegetes.’ So, under the label of ‘reception history’ may now be lumped all those other approaches, like feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, ideological, queer, and so on, all of which are supposedly anachronistic.¹⁵

¹⁴ W. J. Lyons, “Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): p. 215.

¹⁵ R. Boer, "Against 'Reception History,'" *The Bible and Interpretation* (May 2011), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/boe358008.shtml>. Accessed 18th June 2011.

For Boer, this conceptualisation of reception-history explicitly posits ‘scientific’ exegesis as the only method *appropriate* to the text itself and to its historical conditions, avoiding the critical failure of reading meaning *into* the text from our own anachronistic perspectives. On this model, once the proper exegetical work is completed, *Rezeptionsgeschichte* may begin. Of course, as Boer highlights, the historical-critical method is just as anachronistic as the troublesome approaches he lists, an index often problematically collated under a ‘postmodern’ moniker that, again, is a term sometimes simplistically read as chronological. At bottom, Boer contends, ‘scientific’ exegesis to uncover the ‘right’ meaning of a biblical text is actually undergirded by the unmentionable theological assumption that herein “lies a singular perception of what God really means. In other words, this approach is ultimately theological: one method, one meaning, one God.”¹⁶

However, Christopher Heard has argued that Boer’s editorial creates a caricature of much reception-historical work. The Blackwell Bible Commentaries in particular (towards which Boer directs his censure) combine “both *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (read ‘history of use’) and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (read ‘history of influence’ or ‘history of effects’)¹⁷ to ask how the biblical texts have been used and understood in various time periods, and what influence

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ This translation of Gadamer’s *Wirkungsgeschichte* as ‘history of effects’ is one of the main problems with reception-history that Timothy Beal highlights, and which I shall explore below. For biblical scholars ‘history of effects’ invites a historically objective narrative of a biblical text’s continuing impact. As Beal argues, Gadamer’s “effective history is not a historical narrative but a conception of subjective history. There is no effective history *of* something. It’s all *Wirkungsgeschichte* all the way down.” T. Beal, “Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” p. 369.

and effects biblical texts and their uses have had in various time periods.”¹⁸ Such reception-histories actually only treat the biblical text as ‘originary’ in the chronological sense through the simple fact that texts have to exist before they can have any effect. According to Heard, “reception history does not assign an ideological primacy to singular textual meanings ‘uncovered’ by historical-critical exegesis.”¹⁹ He quotes Mary Callaway’s 2004 presentation at the *SBL*, ‘What’s the Use of Reception History?’ to back up his claim: “The basic theoretical assumption of Reception Theory is that texts do not ‘have meaning;’ meaning is rather produced by readers who engage texts. The ‘intention of the author’ and the understanding of the original readers take their place alongside the interpretations of subsequent readers, not above them.”²⁰ John Sawyer also argues, contra Boer, that reception-history does not privilege the historical-critic any more than any other reader as “it is the readers of a text that give it meaning. In a sense the reader creates the text as much as the author does. The role of the reader as creator was a new concept and that is one of the concepts underlying the Blackwells Series.”²¹

¹⁸ C. Heard, "In Defense of Reception History," *Blackwell Bible Commentaries* (2011), <http://bbibcomm.net/2011/06/in-defense-of-reception-history/#more-216>. Accessed 12th January 2012.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ M. C. Callaway, “What’s the Use of Reception History?” (presented at the SBL, San Antonio, 2004), p. 4. Available at <http://bbibcomm.net/reception-history>. Accessed 8th August 2011.

²¹ J. F. A. Sawyer, “The Role of Reception Theory, Reader-Response Criticism and/or Impact History in the Study of the Bible: Definition and Evaluation,” *Blackwell Bible Commentaries*: p. 4, http://bbibcomm.net/?page_id=183. Accessed 8th August 2011.

As such, the reader (whether, as for Boer, the musician Nick Cave²² or a professional biblical scholar such as John Sawyer) is granted equal interpretive access as part of the process of reception and there is no explicit hermeneutic hierarchy. “Callaway also complicates Boer’s attack on reception history as a mono-theological enterprise further, explaining that it is the History of Interpretation approach, indigenous to Jewish and Christian tradition, that is the primarily *theological* enterprise. Reception history can avoid such a theological genealogy because it has its origins in philosophy and its methods in cultural studies.”²³

The fact remains that, although Boer does oversimplify the views of many of those broadly involved in biblical reception-history, at the very least he does identify that because this work is being carried out under the aegis of biblical studies, disciplinary contingencies and privileges exert a gravitational pull over the ideology of biblical interpretation. Scott M. Langston, one of the scholars involved in the Blackwell commentaries project, supports Boer’s contentions somewhat when he identifies that “those factors that privilege one use over another constitute an interesting and important aspect of reception history that needs more attention.”²⁴ As I shall demonstrate, poetic retellings (articulated within a cultural-historical approach) are well positioned to question and problematize some of this constitutional privilege.

²² See R. Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

²³ M. C. Callaway, “What’s the Use of Reception History?,” p. 4.

²⁴ S. M. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 2.

Boer's critique of reception-history is not simply that biblical texts are treated as stable launch-pads for subsequent readings; it is that the process of *exegesis* itself is a technique of writing around the biblical text that ensures (and insures) the Bible's 'originary' or inaugural status whilst also attaching itself to and feeding from exactly this privileged status. Exegesis, as a style of writing, creates an ideal text on which to write—something difficult, foreign, historical, and scholarly—and then offers itself as the primary mode for approaching such a text. Even Roberts and Rowland, whose evident desire is to broaden the remit of the biblical scholar through reception-history, are wedded to invoking a conceptual and practical *exegesis* so as not to distance themselves too far from the 'proper' or the appropriate in biblical studies.²⁵ As they emphasize, "other appropriations may not flag themselves as explicit interpretations of the Bible, but they nonetheless offer *exegetical* insights into the interplay of tradition, context and imagination."²⁶

²⁵ Here my thinking on the idea of the 'proper' is influenced by Steven Shapin's provocative work where he identifies that knowledge production during the seventeenth-century could only proceed by the "notion of epistemological decorum [indicating] the expectation that knowledge will be evaluated according to its proper place in practical cultural and social action...doing the proper thing in the proper setting informed the assessment of knowledge-claims as well as the evaluation of social conduct." *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994), p. xxix. Doing the 'proper' thing is part of all scholarly performance. This is not to dismiss scholarly protocols but to foreground that such protocols and methods are not simply givens but have wider implications for the interests biblical scholarship serves, both historically, and in the contemporary milieu.

²⁶ J. Roberts and C. Rowland, "Introduction," p. 132. My emphasis.

This interplay certainly offers rewarding insights but invoking the term ‘exegesis’ continues to fence-in and protect the scholar from going too far. As Rowland writes elsewhere, “openness to the varieties of effects of biblical texts puts exegesis in touch with wider intellectual currents in the humanities, so that literature, art and music *become part of the modes of exegesis*, taking their place alongside conventional explanatory writings of biblical texts within Christian theology.”²⁷ If exegesis is maintained as the pivot-point in the turn to other humanities subjects the openness in such a turn becomes questionable. The ‘proprietary academic’ claims of historical-criticism²⁸ are still carried over in this word. We might say, following Derrida, that in this mode, exegesis is part of an archiving process, *arkhe* naming, at one and the same time, a commencement and a commandment, a site (physical, historical, or ontological) at which beginnings can be pinpointed “but also the principle according to the law, there where men and gods command, there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given.”²⁹ When literature, art and music are translated into modes of explanatory exegesis, they do not take up an equal place among other more conventional modes; because they are still deemed secondary within biblical scholarship *per se*, they are seen as disordered, outside the law of the archive, and emptied of their potential to trouble how ‘biblical reception’ might be understood. In the sense of the archive as commencement and commandment, literature, art, and music exhibit a kind of illegality within the discipline.

With this in mind, Heard and Boer’s debate thus becomes indicative of a wider problem in reception-history; the confusion between ‘original’ as connoting the *earliest* available

²⁷ C. Rowland, "Re-Imagining Biblical Exegesis," p. 144. My emphasis.

²⁸ J. Roberts and C. Rowland, "Introduction," p. 133.

²⁹ J. Derrida and E. Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): p. 9.

textual sources (*arkhe*); ‘original’ as connoting the finalized biblical text that is then ‘received’; and, finally, in the idea of the ‘primary’ and most appropriate means of interpretation (also as in *arkhe*). It is the ‘idea of the original’ that remains at play in definitions of reception-history. In fact, it is a necessary blindness that helps retain this confusion of *original-secondary* binaries, through, as Derrida terms it, the inevitable yet ‘*dangerous supplement*’³⁰ inherent in writing. I suggest, then, that all writing on bibles, “what we call production [commentary or exegesis] is necessarily a text, the system of a writing and of a reading which we know is ordered around its own blind spot.”³¹ In the case of biblical interpretation, each writing supplements for the absent logocentric presence of biblical ‘meaning’. More and more writing covers the always-retreating or non-existent trace of the original and inaugural pre-biblical utterance which might undersign each exegetical act.

According to Derrida, two significations cohabit within the action of the supplement that are useful to apply to the process of poetic retelling. The supplement “adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It

³⁰ See Part II, Section 2, ‘...*That Dangerous Supplement...*’ on Rousseau’s technique of confessional writing in J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (trans. G. C. Spivak; Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 141-157. The supplement of writing and representation always-already enters the scene due to the lack of a ‘real presence’ (for Rousseau, either Nature, or his Mamma, or his lover, Thèrese) whether in memory and imagination, which attempts to make the absent present, or in acts of self-consciousness and auto-eroticism where the ‘I’ is never fully present to ‘myself’. The supplement both emphasizes and conceals this lack. No act of representation can proceed without it.

³¹ Ibid., p. 164.

cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *technè*, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function.”³² The supplement, whether addition or substitution, is also imagined to be “*exterior*, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it.”³³ But, as we shall see below, this idea of the imaginary or tactical exterior has to be nuanced; there is no ‘outside-text’ from where a fully ‘exterior’ interpretation can be performed.

In order to think ‘reception’ differently therefore, it must be acknowledged that the supplement is not secondary; the ‘original’ can only be invented within supplementary writing. Thus “the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition [...]”.³⁴ The supplement is not passive; Derrida sees it as actually marking a site of power and privilege because the supplement enables an extension of agency (“the moving of the tongue or acting through the hands of others”³⁵) which is fully exemplified ‘through the written’. Thus, because of their often unacknowledged power of substitution and addition, supplements need to be disciplined and appropriate, proper. But the supplement is always-already frustration because it also promises the chimera of presence and fails. So the chain continues and there must be more supplement, more substitution. This is the deeper underpinning that Boer alludes to; by casting reception-histories as *exegetical* in their essential procedure, the disturbing events of literature, music and art can be marked as overtly supplemental and

³² J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 144–145.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

potentially excessive, concealing the fact that exegesis also, necessarily, has to take place as supplement. All writing supplements but some forms seem more supplemental than others. The debates as to the reach and remit of reception-history can be reimagined as concerned with the task of how different supplements are managed and legitimated.

Moving from Reception-History to Cultural-History

In order to move away from the emphasis on exegesis as the preeminent critical form of writing on the Bible, offering a robust interdisciplinary bridge that can relate to issues that actually arise in other disciplines, Timothy Beal's more complex 'cultural history of scripture' is a useful ally. For my purposes in this article, treating the poetic retelling as an act of rewriting opens onto fundamental questions of how the idea of 'the biblical' circulates and is re-imagined across disciplinary borders, going beyond arguments about primary and secondary interpretative manoeuvres.

Beal affirms that reception-history is able to mediate between historical and aesthetic approaches through its insistence that "it is all effective history, always both production and reception"³⁶ and, as such, "possesses the welcome potential to overcome the tired, decades-old opposition between so-called historical-critical approaches...and literary-critical approaches...within the field of biblical studies."³⁷ More significantly, "insofar as it is less interested in discovering meaning *in* biblical texts than it is in how meaning is made *from* biblical texts in different cultural contexts, past and present, it has the potential to

³⁶ T. Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," p. 364.

³⁷ Ibid.

bring biblical scholarship into more significant conversation with other fields of academic religious studies.”³⁸

However, Beal also outlines the limitations of a reception-history that remains bound to an exegetical hermeneutic that privileges scriptural content over scriptural ‘mediality’ and ‘materiality.’ Without this “harder cultural turn,”³⁹ reception-history does not engage with “how that materiality interacts with their historical and material embodiments in the production-reception process.”⁴⁰ Beal echoes Boer’s critique of reception-history as imagining an ‘originary’ text that remains stable enough to be received through the centuries, ensuring that reception-history is always already secondary. Bibles have always been works in progress, *Wirkungsgeschichte* in its broader connotations, “*received* through the centuries in different cultural contexts but...also variously *made* and *remade* within these contexts, driven as much by more or less conscious ideological struggles as by commercial competition.”⁴¹

In an idea that troubles the binary between exegesis and reception, Beal proposes a ‘cultural history’ of the Bible, a way of negotiating ideas of the biblical that conceive of “biblical texts, the Bible, and the biblical as discursive objects that are continually generated and regenerated within particular cultural contexts in relation to complex genealogies of meaning that are themselves culturally produced.”⁴² Work being done in

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.: p. 360.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: pp. 365-66.

⁴¹ Ibid.: p. 369.

⁴² Ibid.: p. 371.

reception-history contributes to this, but more searching questions are also raised, particularly around how the afterlives of ‘the biblical’ “trade in various unstable forms of social, cultural, financial, and sacred capital.”⁴³ Moving away from the priority of exegetical production also shifts the disciplinary constitution of biblical studies. Beal suggests, with his cultural turn in mind, that biblical studies become part of a broader religious studies context, and further, a stronger partner in discussions around the circulation of ‘scriptures’ and ‘parascriptures’ more generally. As an example of this, I suggest that poetic retellings and rewritings of biblical material are uniquely placed to demonstrate how biblical texts, the Bible, and the biblical are discursive elements in diverse signifying practices, made even more complex by poetry’s insider/outsider position within biblical studies and wider culture.

Between Sound and Sense: Poetic Retellings as Knowing Supplement

In order to explore how poetic retellings of biblical material can be usefully read as ‘cultural histories’ that participate in the making and remaking of the idea of the biblical (rather than passively ‘receiving’ or being brought in line with ‘proper’ exegetical methods), I shall weave together the poetry and self-reflexive commentary of Kei Miller and Michael Symmons Roberts with the theoretical work of Derek Attridge on the performance and poetics of literature and Gerald Bruns on the necessary ‘anarchy’ (*an-arkhe*) of the poetic. This analysis will show that the poetic retelling of biblical material is a performative act that is overtly supplemental—‘a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude’ as Derrida puts it.⁴⁴ However, such retellings also refuse secondary status and, as such, problematize what we have been exploring as the originary-secondary binary in

⁴³ Ibid.: p. 366.

⁴⁴ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. p. 144.

reception-historical interpretation, recasting historical-critical exegesis as a different form of writing that is no less supplemental.

Although Miller and Symmons Robert write poems that could be deemed part of the reception-history of certain biblical books and motifs, with Beal's recasting of reception as 'cultural history', we can begin to see how much more is at stake in the "beyondsense"⁴⁵ of a poetic supplement. As part of a 'scriptural culture', a poetic retelling produces a discursive 'ideal bible' and its reception in the same act-event. However, bringing poetry into the citadel of biblical studies is problematic because of poetry's long and difficult relationship with the proper production and organization of stable and critical knowledge. The nature of these relationships casts light over what is deemed legitimate in theories of knowledge and representation. As Mark Edmundson emphasizes, from Plato onwards, "poetry has been on trial, and that by acting exclusively as prosecutors, we do in sophisticated ways what practical, ambitious cultures have always tended to do, if more crudely: discredit what seems to be childish, extravagant, useless, and weird."⁴⁶ Part of why poetry is kept at arm's length is this 'useless' linguistic extravagance. Gerald Bruns

⁴⁵ The Russian Futurist poet, Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922) practiced a poetic that strove to move beyond 'intellectual' or merely understandable sense that acted like a street-sign. 'What about spells and incantations?', he asked, "what we call magic words, the sacred language of paganism, words like 'shagadam, magadam, vigadam, pitz, patz, patzu'—they are rows of mere syllables that the intellect can make no sense of, and they form a kind of beyondsense language in folk speech." V. Khlebnikov, "On Poetry," in J. Cook (ed.) *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 94–95.

⁴⁶ M. Edmundson, *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 66.

suggests that we think of poetry “as an experience of the *resistance* of language to the designs that we place upon it,”⁴⁷ including the desire for language to give us unmediated access to the ‘real’, whether natural, autobiographical or historical. The extravagance of metaphor, juxtapositions that place incongruous objects and ideas side-by-side, the sheer phonetic exuberance of language, all trouble orderly logic (the proprietorial *arkhe*). For Bruns, the question ‘what is literature?’ belies the demand for essences, for reasons, for logocentric structure; poetry exists in the form of a question that hangs over the procedures of writing.⁴⁸

Derek Attridge notes that in trying to answer this question ‘what is literature?’ we become caught in the machinations of the supplement once more, something which has

characterized discourse on the distinctiveness of literary language since classical times. If the linguistic norm of referential language is its ‘natural’ condition, the poetic function must represent an ‘artificial’ supplement that merely adds something, such as an enhanced attention to the material properties of language, to an already complete and self-sufficient entity. But at the same time, if the poetic function produces a superior kind of language, it must make good some lack in the ‘normal’ operation of referential discourse,

⁴⁷ G. L. Bruns, *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 157.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

such as its failure to represent meanings with the full intensity of which language is capable.⁴⁹

Poetry then becomes both addition to *and* replacement of 'ordinary' language at the same time. If, as I have demonstrated above, reception-histories enact the supplements that infiltrates ideologies of the 'original', this linguistic level of poetic supplementarity adds more nuance to an analysis of the literary space of a poetic retelling, to which I shall turn my attention below.

Debates around what poetry is 'for', or what it 'does', continue to animate poets and critics. In his 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', an elegy for both Yeats and poetry, W. H. Auden once famously, and paradoxically, wrote that "...poetry makes nothing happen" only to follow with, a few lines later, "...it survives, / a way of happening, a mouth."⁵⁰ The poetic retelling is a useless stranger, a foreign way of mouthing, a supplemental happening, sur-viving (living on) in the field of biblical studies. In this instance, poetry does make something happen, even if only by reaction; by keeping poetic writing outside the city, biblical criticism can react and 'other' such writing (is it scholarship to write a poem?) and maintain its legitimacy as a *modern* 'scientific' discipline. How does a poetic performance that retells the biblical but cannot be reduced to useful 'exegesis' offer more to our sense of the 'cultural history of scripture'?

The work of poets Michael Symmons Roberts and Kei Miller is a particularly fertile space in which to think these questions of criticism and creativity, sound and sense, reception and

⁴⁹ D. Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 130.

⁵⁰ W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in M. H. Abrams and S. Greenblatt (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), pp. 2506-2508.

performance. Biblical motifs and cadences run through their work as they explore that most modern of dichotomies, the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’. What happens to biblical interpretation when language breaks down, when a passage from James is misheard to terrifying effect or Jacob finds himself dancing with the angel with whom he wrestles? With reference to the poems and commentary from the poets themselves, I shall explore how the poets’ work is never simply exegesis but performs the supplemental in a knowing poetic act, a mouth for the biblical that sounds different every time.

The poems I have selected from Miller’s work, whilst not strictly retellings in the same way as Symmons Robert’s poem, offer a way in to thinking about some of the distinctive traits that make poetry such a problematic guest at the biblical studies table.

Miller’s ‘Speaking in Tongues’ offers a vision of that seemingly most uncritical or pre-critical use of language, the religious phenomenon of speaking in tongues. It would be a brave biblical scholar that would argue for this form of creative response as forming an ‘exegesis’ on a biblical text and, in many ways, it functions as a paradigm for the fear of the demonstrative excess in religion *and* language—the irrational, the unmanageable, an encounter with alterity. Here, a Caribbean grandmother embodies this paradigm;

My grandmother became, instead,
all earthquake – tilt and twirl and spin,
her orchid-purple skirt blossoming.
She became grunt and rumble – sounds
you can only make when your shoes have fallen off
and you’re on the ground
crying *raba* and *yashundai*, *robosei* and

*bababababababba.*⁵¹

To the passer-by, this scene is simply an example of “the deluded pulling words out of dust,”⁵² a kind of disturbed onomatopoeia. But, the poet wants to ask, “What *is* language but a sound we christen?”⁵³ This is a question of how language is used, its representative function, and the ‘unsayability’ or ‘beyondsense’ that haunts every vocalization and utterance that aims at intelligibility. Christening is obviously part of a Christian ritual, often linked with the baptism of children, but in the popular imagination it has the wider connotation of naming, an onomastic function. Naming sounds, attempting to collate ticks and clicks, sibilants and fricatives, the out-breath of vowels alongside the sharper stops of a consonant, and then shaping these into words and syntactical phrases that start to provide symbolic and conceptual meaning—this is what a linguistic system provides. And yet a poem, still operating within a given linguistic system, “always wants to break / from its lines and let a strange language rise up. / Each poem is waiting on its own Day of Pentecost....”⁵⁴ Systemic naming is a threat for the poem because “it is almost always possible to read nouns as names; therefore, it is almost always possible (by a mere change of perspective) to read a poem as if the words in it named something; at that point, literature dies.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ K. Miller, “Speaking in Tongues,” in *There Is an Anger That Moves* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 33.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. My emphasis.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ P. Dayan, *Music Writing Literature, from Sand Via Debussy to Derrida* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 98.

This is where we come up against a primary paradox in literary acts of writing: the refusal for writing to be arrested long enough to be fully present with meaning, the refusal of a paraphrase, excavated and cited elsewhere. The musicality, the texture of poetry, the pleasure of language in its materiality, pushes against representation, or sense as first cause of writing. The problem with fixing literary works as ‘modes of exegesis’⁵⁶ is that they do not necessarily offer critical knowledge. Instead “they may stage the knowability—or the unknowability—of the world by staging the processes whereby knowledge is articulated, or whereby its articulation is resisted.”⁵⁷ ‘Speaking in Tongues’ stages the desire for language to name something rational, orderly. To what does ‘*raba*’ and ‘*yashundai*’ and ‘*robosei*’ refer? The reader does not know but, in many respects, this is a more extreme example of how a reader is confronted by any (literary) text. As Attridge argues,

literary texts...are acts of writing that call forth acts of reading: though in saying this, it is important to remain aware of the polysemy of the term *act*: as both ‘serious’ performance and ‘staged’ performance, as a ‘proper’ doing and an improper or temporary one, as an action, a law governing actions, and a record documenting actions.⁵⁸

The performance of ‘knowability’ which becomes particularly acute in a poetic retelling of biblical material paradoxically heightens our awareness of biblical criticism itself as an ‘act of writing’, embedded in a cultural history of biblical reading. The polysemy at the heart of

⁵⁶ See C. Rowland, “Re-imagining Biblical Exegesis,” cited above.

⁵⁷ D. Attridge, “Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration,” *Paragraph* 28, no. 2 (Jul 2005), pp. 21-22.

⁵⁸ D. Attridge, “Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature,” in D. Attridge (ed.) *Acts of Literature*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

the word 'act' also demonstrates the performativity of biblical criticism and brings to light some of the institutions and constitutions of critical knowledge. As we have seen in Derrida's thought on the *arkhe* as an 'original' locus (a commencement) that is always already a legalized commandment, historical-critical performances are also serious 'acts' of reading and writing within the disciplined laws of 'proper' scholarship. Both poetry and biblical criticism are 'supplemental acts' in this staged and performative sense; but the nuances of the term 'act' operate differently between the two.

In another staging of 'beyondsense', Miller explores how phonetics can evade intelligible sense, or, better, begin to fashion their own intelligibility. The inspiration for 'Psalm 151' came from a discussion with his young cousin on her return from church. She was confused and distressed. She had learned that God was, in a Jamaican phrase, 'the biggest badman about':

Never you rebel against Jehovah—
remember his stoutness
and his plentyland(iness)
and his odd love for vengeance.
Remember Lucifer. Remember
the scriptures are true:
if you draw knife onto God,
Then He will draw knife onto you.⁵⁹

The sermon Miller's cousin heard must have contained at least the first half of James 4:8; "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you," misheard with terrifying effect. So

⁵⁹ K. Miller, "Psalm 151," in *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* (Coventry: Heaventree Press, 2005), p. 54.

here, the mishearing of the sound of a word sends language's signifying phonetics towards a different 'sense' of what the biblical passage meant to this hearer, embedded in a Jamaican social setting where violent crime is regularly reported. For the poet who hears in this mishearing the beginning of a poem, a chain of associations arises, "*musicalized* and become resonant with each other, as if corresponding harmoniously."⁶⁰ Here, the chain of supplementarity which Derrida identifies as the unavoidable trace in writing, becomes linked by phonetic rather than logocentric sense. As Miller himself observes, "there's a kind of way in which I want to convince you cadentially rather than convince you intellectually about something."⁶¹

This is where we see the significance of Beal's rendering of 'cultural history of scripture' as better able to deal with the cultural and material contingences of biblical reception as part of wider making and remaking of 'the biblical'. For Miller, growing up in Jamaica, it was the cadences of the Authorized Version that had such a profound effect on his own poetic voice:

I'm always conscious that there is another kind of voice that I am trying to mimic and there is another kind of voice that is equally part of what I call my poetic heritage. And that has to do with that man, and a Jamaican, who

⁶⁰ P. Valéry and C. Guenther, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', *The Kenyon Review* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1954), pp. 208–233 (214; emphasis original).

⁶¹ K. Miller, M. Symmons Roberts, and M. Schmidt. "What is Language but a Sound we Christen?" Keynote Panel. *Rewriting the Bible: Devotion, Diatribe, Dialogue*. Conference at the University of Glasgow: 14-15th June 2010.

preaches a sermon and there is something about the texture and the tone of that voice that I've thought, that is always amazing.⁶²

Many of the characters that inhabit his poems, particularly the many women who preach, and sing, and prophesy, speak in "Creole spliced with the Old Testament [...] the King James Version; for me and to me that voice brings me back to the Caribbean because that's where people still speak like that right now."⁶³ The idea of 'the biblical' has become part of the materiality of language, soundings that seem to become part of the 'grain' of the everyday and performative utterance. Here, 'the biblical' is heard in the "*the encounter between a language and a voice*."⁶⁴ As Roland Barthes suggests, the 'grain of the voice' is heard in the dual production of language and music, "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly *significance*."⁶⁵ For Miller, throughout his work, the English of the Authorized Version is sometimes a clamp on the tongue,⁶⁶ sometimes a locating of his own language,⁶⁷ yet always living on, a writing

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ R. Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), p. 181. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 182.

⁶⁶ "When, during worship, the song ripens / and lyrics become inadequate, / women will strip Britain / off their tongues, allowing them to dance free...." K. Miller, "Tongues I," in *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* (Coventry: Heaventree Press, 2005), p. 14.

⁶⁷ "...it is inside of me somewhere and reading the Bible for me, often times is locating my own language...reading the Bible is always finding out where my own, my own vocabulary or that phrasing or that way of putting it comes from." K. Miller, M.

become speech, part of the very grain of his poetic voice. In terms of a biblical retelling, Miller's writing *stages* referentiality; many of his poems take specific biblical content and rewrite it for his own purposes. Yet this is not merely an interpretation. Because of the cultural contingencies embedded in his literary writing "while it continues to propel the hearer or reader in this manner it simultaneously interrupts the process by making the very process of referral part of the point: we are affected not just by what is being referred to but by the power of language to refer, and of *this* language to refer in *this* way."⁶⁸ His poems bring the biblical and its reception together in the same moment, in the same sounding. The cadences of the AV echo through everyday language and the literary performances that refer and infer a biblical grain into voice. It becomes difficult to yoke such poetic literature to a primarily 'exegetical' act; in this case, the sound of the biblical precedes any project of making-sense.

With this in mind, we can see the specificity to which Beal's 'cultural history of scripture' is much more attuned; for Miller in particular, his practice is not simply a moment of passive *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the Bible. The Authorized Version is invoked as 'the ideal Bible' that actually, through its phonetic echoes, orientates Miller's work. In one and the same moment, Miller is responding to and reiterating a 'parascripture', something beyond a mere repetition or simple rewriting of extant biblical material. The necessary iterability of 'scriptural' writing results in these complex performative acts, where poetic responses seem voiced through the linguistic grain of the Authorized Version.

Symmons Roberts, and M. Schmidt. "What is Language but a Sound we Christen?"
Keynote Panel.

⁶⁸ D. Attridge, "Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration," pp. 20-21.

For Michael Symmons Roberts sound also becomes involved in a heuristic of sense. His poem 'Choreography' is a colloquial retelling of Genesis 32:22-32 where 'Jacob wrestles an angel':

His fist smashes my face.
That's no wrestler's move;
so it's bare knuckles now. Okay.

There's blood in my eye,
the lid swells to a hood.
I use my head and butt him.

His lips bloom like a rose,
but he's still ticking, clicking
his tongue on the roof of his mouth.⁶⁹

The poem is written in present-tense throughout with the emphasis on the first-person 'I'. Sentences are short and fast, recounting the violent action (bare knuckles, head-butts, gut punches, knees in the jaw, face-dunking, slaps, and finally the enigmatic slipping of the hip "out of its bone-cup"), and metaphorical language is kept to a minimum as the poem circles the performative and spectacular, moving from fight to dance, even if only retrospectively with the realisation in one of the concluding stanzas that "that was no stutter, / but a beat. The dance is over." Although the language and imagery used here does not seem to function as artificial addition to or replacement of 'ordinary language' (that problem of literary language, identified above), the poem still enacts a necessary

⁶⁹ M. Symmons Roberts, "Choreography," in *Corpus* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 25.

supplementarity in its structure; it foregrounds, through its title and unfolding content, how signification is given in performative acts, even when communicated in colloquial language.

Making sense is not then necessarily an unveiling of the ‘meanings’ of a complex biblical passage but, more literally, *inventing* a response. As the etymologies of the word suggest, *invention* can be both a creative act and an event of discovery.⁷⁰ As Symmons Roberts describes his own writing process;

One of the big debates when you are writing poetry based on the Bible or any sort of religious matter is the danger of it becoming instrumental or just illustrative of an idea. But [...] the best poems surprise you as you are writing them, as you are making them and whatever idea you might have about the kind of thing that you may want to say about Jacob and the Angel, the poem wants to say something else and the more you redraft it, the stronger it goes in a particular direction; you almost have to cut it loose from what you thought you believed about that story, because the poem is taking you in another direction and therefore it genuinely is exploratory.⁷¹

⁷⁰ The Latin *invent-* is the participial stem of *invenīre* - to come upon, discover, find out, devise, contrive and, in the artistic sense, to compose, produce, construct. See *Oxford English Dictionary*. Invent, v. Second edition, 1989; online version June 2012. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/98960>. Accessed 5th July 2012.

⁷¹ K. Miller, M. Symmons Roberts, and M. Schmidt. “What is Language but a Sound we Christen?” Keynote Panel.

For Symmons Roberts, the poem is choreographed by the rhythm of this language, especially when sounding the unsaid or unwritten in the gaps and ellipses of the terse biblical stories. The material demands of language set the score for the poetic retelling.

Improper Surprises of Writing: Scholarship and Poetic Retelling

The poem is not, then, necessarily in and of itself, *secondary* to the 'original' biblical text. It may be generated by the imagery and motifs of a particular biblical story but it inaugurates and performs its own originality; it receives and then reconfigures the biblical by staging the always-already supplemental act. Miller and Symmons Roberts comment on their work in terms of creating and being created by the demands of "a double life to language [...]. In one form of creativity, sense turns in a circular path about sound; in the other sound turns about sense."⁷² Through such writing *surprise* becomes a key element in the poetic act. But this *surprise* is also a part of the reading and writing process more generally. As Derrida notes,

the language and the logic...assures to this word or this concept sufficiently *surprising* resources so that the presumed subject of the sentence might always say, through using this 'supplement,' more, less, or something other than what he *would mean*. [...] We should begin by taking vigorous account of this *being held within [prise]* or this *surprise*: the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses.⁷³

⁷² V. Khlebnikov, "On Poetry," p. 96.

⁷³ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 157-58.

The poet cannot dominate the language she or he uses but, in crafting or ‘inventing’ a poem, they are held within certain parameters of language and logic, tensions that provide enough friction for poetry to spark. Derrida says the writer is ‘governed by the system’ but I would prefer ‘choreographed’ with its ambiguous connotations of control, restraint, but also a ‘dance-writing’ that brings music and embodiment together in a staging of knowability.

In this staging of knowability, surprise is a key concept. Because the ‘supplement’ ensures meaning is non-identical with the utterance (the word, poem, text can always mean something else), it is possible to begin to see how biblical criticism and poetic retelling *surprise* one another. A biblical text’s iterability means that whatever could be construed as its primary meaning is always-already a kind of necessary fiction. Both critical writing and poetic writing enact supplementarity with this fiction; part of the mutual sur-prise comes in how differently these writings are choreographed around the same texts.

It is at this axis that reconfiguring biblical *Wirkungsgeschichte* as examples of production-and-reception within a ‘cultural history of scripture’ might overcome the entrenched dichotomies of historical-critical and literary approaches that still constitute some of the thinking in reception-history. As Derrida argues, the structures and machineries of writing haunt philosophical conceptualization as “a debased, lateralized, repressed, displaced theme, yet exercising a permanent and obsessive pressure from the place where it remains held in check. A feared writing must be cancelled because it erases the presence of the self-same [*propre*] within speech [...].”⁷⁴ Writing itself demonstrates that there is no original. If both poetic rewriting *and* biblical criticism are engendered by the ‘supplement’ then both are ‘improper’ in this Derridean sense; both are necessarily unable to reveal the full

⁷⁴ J. Derrida, "The Originary Metaphor," in J. Wolfreys (ed.), *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 88.

presence or meaning of a given biblical text. ‘Unknowability’ is, of course, not a radical admission; most researchers on all things biblical are aware that, at best, we are dealing with approximate dates, corrupted texts, ‘dead’ authors, distant *sitz im leben*. However, the *improper surprise* that I am imagining here is provoked by different writings that circle and compete over the ‘proper’ use of ‘the biblical’ and that speak to bigger questions of how biblical interpretation is legitimated or prohibited in different cultural spheres. As Derrida has often indicated, there is no ‘outside-text’—whichever writing is being pursued, “the philosopher, the chronicler, the theoretician in general, and at the limit everyone writing, is...taken by surprise [...].”⁷⁵

Rather than narrowing down a word to its denotative qualities alone, exegetical work can actually light the touch-paper of an imaginative chain of associations, a surprise, continuing that circular, yet non-identical, relationship of sound and sense in a poem’s language. However, because of the intrinsic demands of the crafting of a poem exegetical certainties cannot have the final say over a given word’s life within the poem. In this sense, biblical exegesis is part of the literary space (as writing) but is usefully and inescapably ‘improper’.

If we make another turn, from the perspective of biblical studies, and with Beal’s ‘cultural history’ in mind, we can then talk of a concomitant ‘improper surprise’ of literature. As I explored above, poetry, and literature more generally, have existed as a problematic in metaphysical discourses of all kinds: “the not true, the not so and the not yet”⁷⁶ with “a

⁷⁵ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 160.

⁷⁶ H. Walton, “When Love Is Not True: Literature and Theology after Romance,” in H. Walton (ed.), *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 51.

stress upon alterity”⁷⁷ is not conducive to simply anchoring a literary retelling or appropriation of biblical material as a mode of exegesis. The improper act of literature questions and stages the “processes whereby knowledge is articulated, or whereby its articulation is resisted.”⁷⁸ For biblical scholars that want to make Beal’s ‘harder cultural turn’ however, these improper acts offer the surprise of *différance*, how the configurations of ‘the biblical’ in poetic retellings explore sound and sense, never finally settling, always deferring to another supplement. Bibles, then, come to be seen not as “self-evident intellectual objects to be particularized or incarnated in various interpretations through time; they are, rather, historically given ‘discursive objects,’ constantly changing as they are made and remade in different cultural productions of meaning.”⁷⁹ Moving away from charges of anachronism, the *improper surprise* of both institutes an *an-arkhe*, neither disciplinary act trumping the other over the battle for authoritative origins. If language is a ‘sound we christen’, names have to be decided upon amidst the anarchy of our inevitable and inescapable speaking in tongues.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

⁷⁸ D. Attridge, "Performing Metaphors: The Singularity of Literary Figuration," pp. 21-22.

⁷⁹ T. Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," p. 370.